



**Cavaliere d' Arpino (Giuseppe Cesari) (Rome 1568 - Rome 1640)**

## **Susanna and the Elders**

Oil on copper

20 1/2 x 15 inches; 52,2 x 38,5 cm.

ENGRAVED: Jacques Bouilliard, see Catalog description Tableux du Palais Royal, 1727

Giuseppe Cesari called Cavalier d' Arpino owes his nickname to his birthplace, Castello Arpino in Lazio. At thirteen the Arpino went to Rome, where he obtained a grant from Pope Gregory XIII himself, which allowed the young artist to enter the studio of Mannerist painter Niccolo Cirgnani. His talent never disappointed the Pope, and he was always supported by this great patron. With papal support, he was given the commission to decorate the Olgiati chapel of the church of Santa Prassede Rome (executed around 1593-1595) when he was 25 years old. This commission is often regarded as one of his first masterpieces and also as the true beginning of a dazzling career. Seen as one of the best young Roman painters, Cesari was commissioned to decorate the vault of the Contarelli chapel in the Church of St. Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. There he was probably assisted by his future rival, the young Caravaggio, who was recorded as part of his workshop in 1593. Despite the election of Pope Clement VIII in 1592 Arpino did not lose his status as a favorite artist of the pontiff. In fact, as the new pope admired him more than his predecessor had and named him first painter of Rome, and in 1600 gave him the title of Cavaliere di Cristo. The decoration of the Pauline Chapel at St. Mary of the Magi (1610-1612) was one of his last big commissions.

The Susanna and the Elders is an important rediscovery of a work by the artist, since the painting was listed in the Corpus of the artist as lost. This unique painting which is in an extremely fine state conservation had remained in the same family since 1812.

The subject is taken from the Book of Daniel. The scene takes place in Babylon. Susanna, naked and preparing for a bath, awakens the lascivious ardor of two old men who said: "We burn with passion for

you: meet our desire, and do what we want. If you do not, we will bear witness against you, and we will say that there was a young man with you." First condemned by this false testimony, she was ultimately freed from all suspicions by King Daniel.

This biblical theme was enormously popular from the sixteenth century, as it allowed artists to exploit the female nude without criticism. Based on style, *Susanna and the Elders* appears to have been painted around 1606, and can be compared to the *Virgin of the Annunciation*, executed by Cesari in the same year (Vatican Museum inv.365). One finds in both the same elegant touch, colors inspired by Venice and architectural elements well arranged in space.

With this work Arpino moved away from the artistic formulas derived from Carracci that were then in vogue in Italy and gravitated to mannerist elegance and its affinities with Venice, especially in the treatment of color. Cesari depicts the nude Susanna, shown as she sensually arranges her hair. He does not choose to show the moment in which Susanna is pressed by the two judges, but rather while she is oblivious of the danger and the lustful eyes that lie in wait. Unaware of the scrutiny of the old men, she behaves with utmost innocence and naiveté before those hidden spectators.

D'Arpino's intelligent composition was recognized by Diderot and praised at an exhibition in 1765, for it had inspired a work of the same subject by Vanloo: "An Italian painter had made a very ingenious composition of the theme. He placed the two old men

on one side and Susanna and her draped garments on the other side, and so she escapes the eyes of the elders, while she engages fully the eyes of the beholder. This composition is very free, and no one is harmed."(Salon 1765, p.66). This great critic recognized, centuries later, the merits of this oil, exhibiting Mannerist elements that were quite classic, rather a rare example in the work of this favorite of the Popes.

This chaste Susanna was recorded in the collection of the Duke of Orleans and until 1792 was the only work by Cavalier d'Arpino in his collection. The regent Philippe d'Orleans started this sumptuous collection of paintings that adorned the galleries of the Palais Royal. A great lover of art, he managed to gather a large number of paintings, and attracted the jealousy of other great collectors. A true esthete, in 1721 he bought the collection of Italian and French paintings of Queen Christina of Sweden after years of negotiations. The works were exhibited at the Royal Palace, not by school or subject, but to maximize the effect of juxtaposition. The mixture of erotic and religious works was not to everyone's taste. So when his son Louis, less sensitive to art, inherited the collection, he attacked with a knife *Leda and the Swan* by Correggio, irritated by the immodesty of the goddess. However, the collection still remained appreciated and renowned for its Italian paintings from the High Renaissance and late Renaissance. In the eighteenth century the collection was greatly admired, and many people became interested through the publication of the *Catalogue description Tableaux du Palais Royal* printed in 1727 and reprinted in 1737. It listed the 495 paintings, and contained engravings by Jacques Bouilliard of the finest works from the collection, of which the *Susanna and the Elders* was a part. In 1792 this painting left the French royal collection, when Louis-Philippe d'Orleans, future king of France, facing heavy financial problems, sold all the paintings of the French and Italian schools to a powerful banker from Brussels for a very modest sum of money in view of the great treasures that made up the collection.

#### **Provenance:**

Galerie du Régent, Philippe duc d'Orléans;  
Sale, *Tableaux de la collection par Louis Philippe*, 1791;  
Collection of Edward de Walkiers, 1791;  
Collection of Monsieur François Laborde-Méréville, 1791;  
Collection of Jérémie Harman, 1793;

Purchased with other works by a consortium comprised of the Earls of Gower and Carlisle and the Duke of Bridgewater, 1798;  
Sale, Lyceum, London, 1798, lot 285;  
Sale, Bryan's Gallery, 1800, lot 25;

Where purchased by John Woodburn, per annotated catalogue at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts;

Sale, estate of Armand-Frédéric-Ernest Nogaret, 6 April 1807, lot 88, withdrawn from sale;  
By descent to his nephew, Dominique-Vincent Ramel-Nogaret ;  
By descent to the previous owners

**Literature:**

- G. Waagen, Treasures of Art in Great Britain, London, Vol II, 1854, p.489;  
J. Couché, La Galerie du Palais-Royal, gravée d'après les tableaux des différentes écoles qui la composent, Paris, 1858-1864, engraving reproduced, p.63;  
C. Stryenski, La Galerie du Régent, Philippe duc d'Orléans, Paris, 1913, Goupil & cie. cited under n°156;  
N.Turner, A newly discovered Painting by the cavaliere d'Arpino, Burlington magazine, October 1977, engraving reproduced, p. 710-713;  
H. Röttgen, Il cavalier Guiseppo Cesari d'Arpino, un grande pittore nello splendore della fama e nell'incostanza della fortuna, Rome, 2002, p.374, as lost